

SIR PHILIP'S WOOING

BY BABINGTON WHITE, AUTHOR OF "CIRCE," ETC.

"WELL, sirrah, what is your news of the house to which I directed you?" asked Sir Philip Stanmore of his servant, as that worthy entered the baronet's lodging, flushed and breathless as if with hurried walking. "Is the lady I saw at the play last night maid, wife, or widow?"

"She is the lady of a wealthy gentleman from the country, Sir Philip," answered the valet, "Master Humphrey Mardyke."

"My cousin Mardyke, as I live!" exclaimed the baronet.

"Your cousin, sir?"

"Yes, fellow, a cousin I never met, but whose father I knew well enough twenty years ago. I have little cause to love this Humphrey Mardyke, for he inherited a fine old place in Warwickshire, which, but for his existence, might have come to me. And so that lovely girl is my cousin Humphrey's wife! I saw her but a few minutes, when she removed her mask for coolness; but I swear I am over head and ears in love with her. Never did I look upon a fairer face. Did you ask all the questions I bade you?"

"Yes, Sir Philip; I contrived to scrape acquaintance with Master Mardyke's servant, a country fellow. The house is only a lodging-house, but the gentleman is rich. They see few visitors, and have been only six months married."

"Good; I will call upon my cousin this afternoon."

In all the libertine court of Charles Stuart there were few men more deeply dyed in sin than Philip Stanmore. He had begun life with every advantage, but had wasted his

substance amongst the most profligate men of the day, and now lived chiefly by his profits at the gaming-table, and by the victimisation of younger men fresh from the provinces, who, in their ignorance of court and town, regarded the accomplished baronet as the arbiter of taste and fashion. He had spent a handsome fortune, and had yet the reputation of the wealth that he had wasted. At thirty-seven years of age he had learned the sharper's wisdom, and contrived to hoodwink his friends and creditors as to the real state of his purse. Sir Philip had never married; but the time had now come in which he felt the necessity of some happy stroke in the matrimonial market. He was still an eminently handsome man, and on the strength of an occasional epigram and a few graceful love-songs modelled upon the verses of Lord Rochester, and popular among the beauties of the court, he enjoyed the reputation of a very pretty wit and poet. Trading upon these gifts, it must go hard with him if he failed to fascinate some wealthy maid or widow. But in the mean time Sir Philip was so ardent an admirer of beauty as to be won by the first glance of a lovely face, and so firm a believer in his own powers of conquest that he fancied he had only to secure access to the fair stranger whose charms had attracted his bold roving gaze in the crowded play-house in order to obtain her good graces. His surprise on finding the name of the lady was very great, and not altogether unpleasant.

"Humphrey Mardyke," he muttered, as he paced the room to and fro when his servant had left him, "Humphrey Mardyke, that smooth favourite of fortune, whom my rich uncle chose for his heir for love of a woman who had jilted him to marry the lad's father! Was there ever such a reason for favouritism? And so that lovely creature is the wife of my country cousin,—a woman born to adorn a court. I will call upon these newly-found relations without an hour's delay."

The baronet put on his plumed hat, and then paused to contemplate himself thoughtfully in the glass before leaving his lodgings.

"The crow's-feet begin to show, Phil," he said to himself; "'tis time thou wert promoted to the holy estate of matrimony, couldst thou but find an object worthy so great a sacrifice."

He strolled slowly down the staircase and out into the street, where he gave many a careless greeting to acquaintance as he made his way to the neighbourhood of Covent-garden, in which locality his kinsman's lodging was situated.

Master Mardyke was out, the servant told him; but his lady was within, and alone.

Sir Philip was in nowise displeased to avail himself of this opportunity. He bade the man announce his name, and followed so swiftly on the lacquey's heels that Mistress Mardyke had no time to decline his visit.

He introduced himself with a perfect grace that went far to set the lady at her ease. The lovely face that had caught his attention in the playhouse appeared to him still more enchanting in the broad light of day, and the girlish timidity of manner, which testified to the young wife's provincial rearing, seemed to him only to enhance the charm of her youthful beauty. He set to work at once to ingratiate himself into her

favour by his lively description of town life and town pleasures, of which she was thoroughly ignorant.

"I cannot get my husband to take any interest in London," she said. "He is always sighing for Holmwood and his rural occupations."

"He is an ardent sportsman, I presume?"

"Yes," replied the lady with a sigh; "he hunts from October to April, and in summer-time is occupied wholly with the care of his farms."

"A dull life for you, madam."

To this proposition Constance Mardyke was fain to assent; but she hastened to declare that Humphrey was the most indulgent of husbands, and that it ill became her to be discontented.

Master Mardyke came in while his wife was praising him, and on Sir Philip introducing himself as a kinsman, gave that gentleman a hearty welcome to his lodgings.

"It is vastly kind in you to seek us out, cousin, all things considered," he said. "I feared my uncle Antony's will might have set you against me; but I see you are too generous to grudge me the favour which habits and neighbourhood won for me from the old man, while you were following the king's fortunes abroad."

On this they shook hands a second time, and the baronet offered to introduce his kinsman to society which would make London pleasant to him during his sojourn.

"'Tis but a desert at best, unless one knows the right people," said Sir Philip. "You must dine with me this afternoon, cousin Mardyke—a mere bachelor's dinner; and in the evening we will escort your lady to some pleasure-gardens, where she will see the beauties of the court. She will find their graces but faded and artificial beside her own fresh loveliness," he added with a low bow.

After some slight hesitation, Humphrey Mardyke accepted his cousin's invitation; and from this time the baronet scarce allowed a day to pass without showing some attention to the country gentleman and his wife. He contrived to make himself equally agreeable to both. Before a month had passed, Humphrey had learned to take pleasure in all the dissipation of his cousin's profligate existence; while Constance had fallen into a fatal habit of making comparisons between her husband's country-bred plainness of speech and manner, and the subtle charm of Sir Philip Stanmore's discourse, which flattered without seeming to flatter. She would have recoiled with horror from the idea that this man was more to her than any acquaintance should be to a married woman, yet she found the hours between his visits long and heavy; and as the time drew near for the return to Warwickshire, she looked forward with supreme dislike to the dulness of her country home.

The time came at last, however, when the return journey could no longer be delayed. The London visit had cost Humphrey a year's income; for he had lost considerable sums to Sir Philip at cards, and had paid heavy scores for tavern dinners given to that gentleman and his boisterous hard-drinking friends. Nor was this the only objection to London dissipation. Constance Mardyke was beginning to lose the freshness of her beauty in the feverish atmosphere of pleasure-gardens and playhouses. Her spirits were fitful, her nights sleepless, and her manner altogether changed from its girlish gaiety to the weary languid listlessness of a woman of fashion.

It was in vain that Sir Philip entreated his cousin to remain longer in London. The hunting season was close at hand, and Humphrey was obstinate.

"You must spend your Christmas

at Holmwood, Philip," he said cordially; but Constance did not second the invitation. She stood a little way apart, but the baronet saw she waited anxiously for his reply.

He made the answer a doubtful one. He had so many invitations for Christmas; but, if possible, would spend a few nights at his cousin's house.

"I should like to see Holmwood once more," he said. "I was there when a boy, and well remember the fine old place, which my father was foolish enough to tell me might be my own some day. Do not think I envy your ownership, Humphrey. You make a better squire than I should have done."

With this they parted: with much cordiality between the two men—with a reserve that was almost coldness on the part of Constance. Her hand trembled faintly as she gave it to Sir Philip, and the one piercing glance which he shot into her eyes as she raised them timidly to his face told him that his tactics had been successful. He had played his cards with supreme caution, taking care that no word of his should offend the wife's modesty, or give her an excuse for banishing him from her presence. By every assiduous attention he had made his friendship valuable to her, and he trusted to the future to recompense him for the trouble he had taken.

Christmas drew near, after an interval that had seemed bleak and dreary to Constance Mardyke, fair as was the home to which she and her husband returned when they left London. To Humphrey the autumn months had brought pleasant occupation; and he fancied the simple course of their country life must needs be as agreeable to Constance as it was to himself; especially as she made no complaint of the dulness of her existence, and indeed contrived to assume an air of gaiety

in his presence which beguiled him into a complete belief in her happiness. She was no skilled hypocrite, but a secret consciousness of her own wicked folly had taught her artifice. The pain of parting with Philip Stanmore had awakened her to the shameful truth. It was not as a common acquaintance that she had learned to take pleasure in his society. Unconsciously she had allowed his influence to become paramount in her mind, to the utter destruction of her happiness.

As Christmas approached, she was tortured by suspense, now hoping for his coming, now praying that he might not come.

"What good can arise from his visit?" she asked herself; "the place will seem only drearier when he is gone."

But however she might argue with herself, the secret feeling of her heart was an ardent desire to see Philip Stanmore again; and when his horse galloped up to the gothic porch of Holmwood House one fine December afternoon, it seemed to her as if dulness and sorrow vanished before the coming of that expected guest.

He came quite alone, unattended by his servant, who knew a little too much of his master's life to be safely trusted in a country house, where his tongue might have been fatally busy to the baronet's detriment.

Sir Philip was not a hunting man, and his mornings were given wholly to the society of his hostess. Humphrey had a perfect confidence in his wife, and knew no thought of jealousy. The baronet was, moreover, ten years his senior, and the simple country gentleman had no idea of the insidious power that lurks in the conversation of an accomplished courtier and diplomatist.

Left thus to their own resources, it was not long before the acquaintance between Sir Philip Stanmore

and Constance Mardyke ripened into something more than friendship. Sir Philip knew himself to be beloved, and after a prudential delay ventured to reveal his own hopeless passion. The avowal came when his victim's entanglement made her too weak even to assume indignation, and she could only implore him to be silent and to leave her.

"It was an evil hour in which we met," she said. "You know not how much I owe my husband for his disinterested affection. I was a penniless girl when he chose me for his wife, and from that hour to this have known nothing but the most indulgent kindness from his hands."

Sir Philip responded to this speech by a lamentation of his own unworthiness, and an expression of his warm regard for Humphrey. He pretended that his avowal had escaped him against his own will, and promised to offend no more.

"Forget what I have told you," he said imploringly. "Your friendship is more to me than the love of other women. Trust me, Constance, and I will try to prove myself worthy of that friendship."

Reassured by this declaration, Constance no longer urged the curtailment of Sir Philip's visit, nor did he again offend her by any allusion to his guilty passion. The days passed rapidly in the dangerous pleasure of his society, while the evenings were rendered profitable to him by games at cards, in which his superior skill generally made him a winner. Humphrey could afford to lose, and lost with a good grace, little knowing how welcome his coin was to the empty pockets of his elegant kinsman. The simple-minded country gentleman had a perfect belief in his cousin's friendship, and gave him his entire confidence upon every subject.

"Yes," he said once, when Sir Philip had been congratulating him on his good fortune, "there are few

finer estates than Holmwood; and should anything happen to me in the hunting-field, my widow will be one of the richest women in the county."

"What, are you so prudent as to have made your will already, cousin?"

"I made it a month after my marriage. A hunting-man had need be prepared for the worst. In default of a son, my wife will inherit every acre and every sixpence I possess."

Sir Philip had been artfully leading the conversation to this very point. Much as he admired, nay, after his own fashion, loved Constance Mardyke, it was far from his thoughts to encumber himself with a runaway wife, a penniless woman, whose dishonoured career would be a burden to himself in the future. Very different would be his prospects should some accident remove the owner of Holmwood from his pathway.

Once assured that the estate was secure to Constance in the event of her husband's death, Sir Philip gave himself up to guilty dreams and guilty wishes; and if a wish could have killed Humphrey Mardyke, that gentleman would not have had long to live.

With Christmas came other guests to Holmwood: Constance Mardyke's father, a gray-haired country parson, a squire and his wife with a couple of pretty girls from their home at some twenty miles' distance, and a young man called Basil Hungerford, a bachelor cousin of Humphrey's. To these guests Sir Philip contrived to make himself infinitely agreeable; and the festival season passed with much mirth and joviality on the part of all except the hostess, whose guilty conscience weighed heavily upon her amidst these simple domestic pleasures. On New Year's-day there was to be a great meet and hunting-breakfast

at a market-town thirty miles from Holmwood, and Humphrey Mardyke had given his promise to be present at the public breakfast as well as in the hunting-field. This would oblige him to leave home on the previous day; and on hearing this, Sir Philip declared his intention to depart at the same time.

"I came here from Lord Scarsdale's," he said. "His place is but fifteen miles distant, as you know, and my road will lie with yours for ten miles of the way. We can go together, cousin. I promised Scarsdale to return long before this; but you have made my visit so agreeable, it is hard to tear myself away."

Sir Philip and his host set out together on the appointed morning, accompanied by Basil Hungerford. Constance came to the porch to bid her husband and guests good-bye. She was looking paler than usual, and strangely careworn, as it seemed to her husband, who looked at her anxiously as he bent down from his saddle to give her his farewell kiss.

"Why, you are as pale as a ghost, my darling," he said; "what is amiss?"

She assured him, in hurried accents, that there was nothing amiss; she was only a little tired.

Sir Philip Stanmore was the last to bid her good-bye, and as he did so he contrived to slip a letter secretly into her hand. Had she been inclined to reject the missive, she could not have done so; but she had indeed little inclination to decline this first letter which she had ever received from him. As the horses galloped away down the avenue leading to the park-gates, she hurried to her room to read the baronet's communication at her leisure.

It was a passionate love-letter, in which the writer dwelt despairingly on the agony of this parting, deploring in eloquent words the fate that severed him from the only woman

he had ever truly loved. Weakly, fondly she dwelt upon these passionate words, and her tears fell fast upon the letter before she folded it and hid it in the bosom of her dress. For two days she was to be alone; ample leisure in which to dwell upon a missive that seemed to her like a first love-letter. Humphrey had written to her but seldom before their marriage, and his epistles were very poor and school-boy-like when compared with the composition of the courtly wit and rhymester.

Throughout those two long days of solitude Constance Mardyke was haunted by thoughts of the man who had won her heart from the path of duty. Vainly did she endeavour to banish his image from her mind. He had taken too complete a possession of her weak womanly wits, and happiness in a life-long separation from him seemed impossible to her.

The day appointed for the hunt was wet and stormy, and she roamed listlessly through the empty rooms, listening to the rain beating against the windows, and towards evening trying to distinguish the sound of horses' hoofs in the avenue. But night closed in, and her husband did not return. She sat up late waiting for him, but at midnight he had not arrived.

"He will come to-morrow, no doubt," she said, as she dismissed the servants and retired to her own room. Strange dreams haunted her that night—dreams with which the sound of the falling rain mingled dismally. She fancied she was walking with her husband through the rain and darkness upon the road by which he must needs return; but although they seemed to walk rapidly, they could make no progress. One particular turn of the road, with three gaunt poplars growing on one side, and on the other some pollard willows shading

a stagnant pool, a spot she remembered well, was always before her in that weary nightmare-like dream.

She woke in the morning unrefreshed and low-spirited, to drag through another day. It was growing towards dusk, when she rose with a sense of weariness from her tapestry-frame, and opened the cabinet in which she had hidden Sir Philip's letter. An idle fancy had seized her to read it once more before her husband's return, and then she might perhaps bring herself to destroy the precious document. She opened the door of the cabinet, took out the letter, and began to reperuse the lines that were already but too familiar to her. As she read the first words, a faint sound near at hand, like a half-suppressed sigh, startled her. She looked up suddenly, clutching the guilty letter to her breast, and in a mirror opposite the open door she saw the reflection of her husband's face. He was standing on the threshold. She turned, in supreme confusion, to meet him. He stood within the doorway, his countenance, as it seemed to her, gravely reproachful; but before she could utter a word, the familiar figure melted into thin air. She hurried to the landing-place outside the door, but there was no living creature there. The thing which she had seen was a shadow. She fell at the foot of the great staircase in a dead swoon, and it was not till an hour afterwards that her maid found her there, with Sir Philip's letter clasped in her hand. Her first thought on recovering consciousness was a fear lest this letter should have been seen; but throughout her swoon she had held the crumpled paper tightly.

"Has my husband come home?" she asked.

"No, madam."

"You are quite sure?"

"Yes, indeed, madam," the girl answered, with surprise.

That night passed, and there were no tidings of Humphrey Mardyke, although his groom, who brought home the horse on which his master had hunted, said he had expected to find him at home.

"He left Wetherby before I did," said the man, "but I believe he had some notion of breaking the journey at Scarsdale Castle. I heard Sir Philip Stanmore give him the invitation to lie there for a night as they parted company at the cross-roads on Monday last."

This seemed likely enough, and the prolonged absence of the master gave no uneasiness to the household at Holmwood, though Constance could not banish the memory of that pale shadowy figure, so like and yet so different from life, which she had seen in the twilight. To the servants she had not dared to mention this figure, believing it an emanation of her own guilty mind, and fearing their ridicule of her folly, or possibly their suspicion of her sin. She waited anxiously for her husband's return, resolved to welcome him with affection, and to struggle with all her might against her fatal regard for Sir Philip. Unhappily, the opportunity to fulfil this penitent resolve was not to be afforded to her. Next day passed without any tidings of the absent, and on the following evening there came the news of her husband's murder. He had been found, shot through the heart, lying on the brink of the stagnant pool, at that very spot which she had seen in her dream.

The country was up in arms to discover the doer of this evil deed. Humphrey Mardyke had been as popular as he was wealthy, and people were eager to see his assassin brought to justice. Lord Scarsdale was one of the witnesses at the inquest. He described how his guest had left him at noon, intending to ride straight home. He had another guest, who left him at the

same hour; but the roads of the two men lay in opposite directions, for Sir Philip Stanmore was to ride to a town twenty miles distant from Scarsdale on the London road, there to find a coach that plied to and fro the metropolis.

This was all Lord Scarsdale could tell. He had seen the two gentlemen part company at the lodge-gates, and had then returned to his house.

The inquest was brief, and threw little light upon the circumstances under which Humphrey Mardyke had met his death. His pockets had been emptied of their contents by hasty hands, for they were found turned inside out. His horse was discovered loose in a field some distance from the scene of the murder, and the state of his mud-stained garments gave evidence to the fact that the fatal shot had been fired while he was still in the saddle. Who could doubt that the deed was the work of some highway robber? Humphrey Mardyke had not an enemy in the world, and what personal motive could prompt so vile an assassination except the vulgar greed of gain? A large reward was offered for the apprehension of the murderer; but days and weeks went by, and no information was brought to Holmwood, or to the little country town where the inquest had been held. News was slow to travel in those days, and three weeks elapsed before Constance received a letter of condolence from Sir Philip Stanmore—a letter in which he dwelt with generous warmth upon the merits of the deceased, and delicately forbore from any allusion to his passion for her who was now free to return his affection. Weak and wicked as she had been, Constance Mardyke lamented her husband's untimely fate with genuine grief. The thought of her own guilty preference for another man filled her with self-reproach, and now that it was too late to atone for her error,

that error seemed doubly base. She was not, however, suffered to mourn long in her country solitude. Within two months of her husband's death Sir Philip paid another visit to Holmwood, riding over from his friend Lord Scarsdale's, as on the previous occasion, in order to give a kind of accidental appearance to his coming.

He had not been many hours at Holmwood before he assumed the speech and bearing of a lover, nor did he fail to win the widowed girl from her penitential grief. In the presence of the observant old butler he was, however, carefully ceremonious. It was too early yet to show his cards, except to the weak girl, of whose heart and mind he had long ago made himself master. A faint flash of triumph brightened his eyes every time he glanced round the noble rooms, or towards the wide expanse of park and wood before the old Tudor windows. The only obstacle to his possession of this place and all its belongings had been removed from his pathway. He knew that he had but to wait a fitting time in which to claim the widow and her fortune, nor did he leave Holmwood until he had made Constance promise two things: first, that she would come shortly to London, where change of air and scene would help to banish the haunting memory of the dead; and secondly, that she would become Lady Stanmore as soon as a decent period of mourning had elapsed. While talking of her dead husband she had told Sir Philip, somewhat reluctantly, of the strange vision she had seen on the threshold of her bed-chamber. But this apparition he ridiculed as the work of a distempered fancy.

"It is little wonder for you to see ghosts in the solitude of this dull old house," he said; and it was upon this that he persuaded her to consent to a sojourn in town.

Once in London, remote from village gossips, he knew that it would be easy for him to hasten the marriage which would make him master of Humphrey's noble estate; and he had pressing need that this change should take place speedily, as his finances were at the lowest ebb.

His hopes were not disappointed. Constance Mardyke came to London accompanied only by her faithful serving-woman. She occupied the lodgings in which she had lived with her husband during the previous year, and being utterly ignorant of all business matters, and without friends in the metropolis, she very soon allowed Sir Philip to assume the management and to obtain the complete control of her affairs. No suspicion of mercenary motives on his side had ever entered her mind; she supposed him to be as wealthy as he was fashionable, a delusion which he took good care to sustain. He thus became, even before his marriage with the widow, absolute master of Humphrey Mardyke's fortune.

Sir Philip was not, however, less eager for the celebration of the marriage, and at the close of the summer Constance consented to become his wife. They started for Holmwood almost immediately after the marriage ceremony, the bridegroom secretly eager to inspect the estate which was now his own. He found it even wider in extent than he had hoped, and was much gratified by the reception he met with among the tenantry, who were fascinated by his easy affable manners, and somewhat inclined to prefer him to the late lord of the soil.

For some months the novel grandeur and occupations of his position made life tolerably agreeable to the baronet; but he was a man of restless nature and long habits of dissipation. The time came when he grew weary of Holmwood; weary too of

his wife's society, as it seemed to Constance, who kept a close watch on the changes of her husband's countenance. The accomplished courtier, who had been so devoted as a lover, was now often moody and absent-minded, and when his wife questioned him with tender anxiety, was sorely puzzled to account for his gloom.

"Nay, Constance, few men who think at all are without some subject for dark thoughts," he said impatiently. "You must not watch me so closely by day and night. The truth of the matter is, Holmwood is too dull a residence for a man who has spent his life in the society of a court. We must live in London if you would see me cheerful. There is a funereal atmosphere in this place, as if it were haunted by the shadows of every master who ever inhabited it in the past."

"What, Philip, have you seen a ghost?"

"No, Constance, I am too much a man of the world for that; but the dulness of the place gives me bad dreams."

"Yes, I have heard you cry out in your sleep," answered his wife thoughtfully.

"Indeed! Have I uttered words that you could distinguish?"

"Not often. Once you spoke of the place where they found my husband. 'Under the willows by that black stagnant pool!' you cried. Strange, is it not, that the place should haunt you in your dreams, as it haunted me on the night before the murder?"

Sir Philip's brow darkened in gloomy thought, but he made no reply to his wife's speech. He left her presently to ride alone, and an idle fancy took him to the spot of which she had spoken—the bend in the road where three tall poplars stood out black against the winter sky, and where the pollard willows bent their weird trunks across a

shallow stagnant pool. He looked at the place for some minutes, lost in thought, and then turned and galloped home again, as if the foul fiend had been behind him.

From this time he daily became more restless in his habits and gloomy in his temper. The wealth that he had won for himself could not give him happiness. His wife's beauty had no longer power to charm the fickle mind that had ever sought new conquests; nor was her gentle yielding nature calculated to maintain ascendancy over his fitful soul. He had determined to go to London soon after the beginning of the new year, and if possible to go there alone.

On the anniversary of the night on which the shadow of Humphrey Mardyke had appeared to his wife, it came again, but this time to the new master of Holmwood, who met the ghostly form of his dead rival in the corridor upon which his bed-chamber opened. Again it was in the early twilight that the vision appeared, pale, grave, reproachful of aspect, with fixed eyes and solemn motion; and again Sir Philip tried to convince himself, as he had tried to convince Constance, that the figure was but the emanation of a disturbed brain. He did not succeed in this attempt, however. Men were prone to superstition in those days, and the baronet was inclined to regard this spectral visit as an omen of his own untimely death.

He was on the point of starting for London next day, after declaring that he would not spend a night in that accursed haunted house, when a couple of messengers came from the nearest town to request his immediate presence there. Something had transpired which promised to throw light upon the circumstances of Humphrey Mardyke's assassination, and the county magistrate wanted the attendance of Sir Philip and Lady Stanmore—the

latter to identify some property which was supposed to have belonged to her first husband.

The baronet's face grew ghastly pale as one of the men stated their errand. He was at first inclined to resist the summons, on the plea of his journey to London; but the elder of the two men declared the magistrate's orders to be imperative. They were not to leave Holmwood without Sir Philip; and Lady Stanmore was to follow immediately, in her coach or on horseback, as might be most convenient to herself.

"It is not a four miles' ride," said the man, with grim politeness, as Sir Philip and he rode abreast along the avenue. The baronet said nothing. This species of summons was strangely like an arrest; but any attempt at resistance would have been worse than useless. He saw that both men were fully armed, and that their horses were as good as his own.

Arrived at the town, he was conducted at once to the chief inn, where he found one of the county magistrates, Lord Scarsdale, and some other gentlemen seated in the principal chamber awaiting his coming.

The magistrate received him with stately politeness; but his familiar friend, Lord Scarsdale, saluted him coldly, and scarcely touched the hand which he offered.

"You were not present at the inquest held on the remains of Mr. Humphrey Mardyke, I believe, Sir Philip Stanmore?" said the magistrate.

"I was not. I was in London at the time, and did not even know of my friend's unhappy fate. Nor should I have been able to offer any evidence had I been present at the inquest."

"Indeed! You were in London at the time. Can you swear to having reached London on the fourth of January in last year?"

"Certainly, if there is any occasion for my taking an oath on the subject, which I cannot myself apprehend. Lord Scarsdale is aware that I left his house at noon on the third of the month, with the avowed intention of riding to Gorsham, on the London road, there to join the mail-coach."

"And you never saw Mr. Mardyke after bidding him good-bye at Scarsdale gates?"

"Never. Our ways lay separate from the moment of leaving the gates."

"And how about your horse, Sir Philip—what became of him when you joined the coach?"

"I left him at the inn at Gorsham, to be brought up to London by a packhorse-driver next day."

"Will you swear that you were not in Haverfield village on the night of the third of January, several hours after the mail-coach left Gorsham, and that you did not there exchange a broken-knee'd horse and a gold watch for a sound animal?"

Sir Philip started and grew deadly pale.

"I was never in any place called Haverfield in my life, that I am aware of," he said, "nor did I ever make such a bargain as that you speak of."

"Indeed!" replied the magistrate. "Then Lord Scarsdale's groom must be mistaken as to the identity of a horse which was offered for sale here in yesterday's market, and which he swore to be yours—a bay gelding, with a white streak on one side of the face. Did you ever own such a horse, Sir Philip?"

"Nay," interposed Lord Scarsdale, while the baronet hesitated, "he cannot deny that the horse was once his. I remember the animal perfectly, and will swear to the watch as Humphrey Mardyke's."

"The watch?" gasped Sir Philip.

"Yes," replied the magistrate, producing a massive gold watch.

"On being questioned, the man who offered the horse for sale declared himself to be an innkeeper at Haverfield. He received this watch and a broken-knee'd horse from a traveller who took shelter at his house on the night of the third of January, after having broken his horse's knees in the attempt to jump a five-barred gate that divided a short cut across fields from the main road. The man exchanged a good horse of his own for the injured animal and this watch, which he was wearing yesterday. His account of the circumstance seemed thoroughly honest, and his voluntary description of the traveller tallies in every respect with your appearance. You will scarcely be surprised, therefore, Sir Philip, that I considered it my duty to order your arrest, under the suspicion of being a party to the death of your wife's first husband."

"The story is a tissue of lies," cried the baronet, "a conspiracy."

"In that case you can have no objection to see the man who offered the horse for sale, and whom we found wearing this watch," answered the magistrate; and at a nod from him a respectable-looking countryman entered the room.

He swore immediately to the identity of Sir Philip Stanmore with the traveller who had taken shelter at his house, drenched to the skin, and worn out with a cross-country ride on the night of the third of January. His evidence was perfectly clear and straightforward, and no questioning of Sir Philip's could shake his statements. Lady Stanmore had now arrived, and on being shown the watch at once recognised it as her late husband's property. She had yet to learn the awful inference to be drawn from the manner of its recovery.

"If you are indeed unconcerned in this business, it will be easy for you to find an alibi, Sir Philip," said the magistrate; "but in the

mean time you must consider yourself under arrest, and I shall be compelled to order your removal to the town gaol, there to await your trial at the next assizes."

Constance uttered a cry of horror on hearing this, and sank, half-fainting, into the chair that had been placed for her. Sir Philip had by this time recovered his usual self-possession. He protested against his arrest as an infamous and preposterous proceeding.

"In all probability this man is himself the assassin," he said.

"We have the evidence of Lord Scarsdale and his groom as to the identity of the horse, Sir Philip. It is that which justifies your arrest."

"And I have twenty people at command who will swear that I was at home at Haverfield all through the day of the murder," said the innkeeper.

Sir Philip Stanmore was removed to the town gaol, after having been compelled to surrender his sword and travelling pistols. He parted tenderly from his wife, who believed him the victim of some fatal error, and who would fain have accompanied him to his prison. This he forbade, and departed between his gaolers in haughty silence, after giving his wife the address of a London lawyer whom she was to summon immediately to his aid. A month would elapse before the assizes, and if the baronet were indeed as innocent as he protested himself to be, there could be no great difficulty in proving the fact of his journey to London. It was impossible for him to have reached London on the fourth, if he had been at Haverfield at the hour mentioned.

He was not destined again to face his accusers. His health, which had been in a declining state ever since his coming to Holmwood, broke down completely under the

misery of his position, and an attack of gaol-fever brought him to a grave at least less shameful than that which would have awaited him as a condemned murderer. On the night before his death he sent for his wife, and to her ears alone confessed his crime. He had turned his horse's head about immediately after leaving Scarsdale gates, had ridden across a common that skirted Humphrey's road home, and had overtaken him by the three poplars, where he shot him through the heart without a moment's parley. He stopped to rifle his victim's pockets, in order that the act might seem that of a highway robber, and had then ridden off across country, reckless which way he went in the great horror and agony that came upon him after the commission of the crime. At Haverfield, finding his horse completely lame, and having very little money, he had been compelled to offer the dead man's watch as a temptation to the landlord, who, seeing the travel-

ler's distress, drove a hard bargain for his own animal.

"It was for your sake I did the deed, Constance," he said; and the unhappy woman believed him. "There was only his life between us. I knew that you loved me, and in the last half-hour before I left Scarsdale I came to the desperate resolve that ended in your husband's death. The act was as mad as it was wicked, and I can truly swear that I have never known an hour's peace of mind since it was done."

He died at daybreak; and Constance returned broken-hearted to Holmwood, there to lead a life of solitude and repentant sorrow for a few years, at the end of which time she fell into a decline and died, leaving the fine old place to fall into the hands of her first husband's distant relations, who came from a northern shire to take possession of the estate, and who were never troubled in their occupancy by the shadow of Humphrey Mardyke.

NOT MINE

THE very sun was mocking me that rose that day to shine,
As I stood beside the altar and she placed her hand in mine;
And yet, God knows, I loved her in her noble mien and pride
As she rose a wife before me, like the statue of a bride!
And the household politicians told the tidings with a zest,
That the discord of a century at length was laid to rest;
So she took me for a hostage, and I took her as a spoil—
The landlord in possession of an unresponsive soil.

* * * * *

Now the sluggish months creep by me, and I watch her pallid cheek,
That shows no flush upon it when I turn to her and speak;
For her hand will hold mine passively, her head ne'er turn away,
Without a sign accepting all the worship that I pay.
And my spirit dies within me, as day by day I prove
Her meed of chill obedience, but not one ray of love;
And I know my heart is withered, as my yearning glances rise
From the summer in her bosom to the winter in her eyes.
Then I seek the kinder pillow, and I rest my weary head,
To look into the Future, and to wish that I were dead!

R. REECE, M.A.